### А. Deism

**1. Beliefs**

According to deism, there is only one God, yet He does not exist as a Trinity. He is “eternal, unchangeable, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good, true, just, invisible, infinite – in short, completely perfect, lacking in nothing.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In this teaching, God is totally transcendent. He is so removed from His creation that people have no access to Him or contact with Him. In other words, God is transcendent, but lacks the dimension of immanence.

Deism teaches that when God created the world, he left it in perfect condition under the operation of natural laws. Joyce describes this idea as follows: “It seems more in accordance with the principles of Deism that Nature should be left to work itself out in obedience to the laws originally given.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Just like their Creator, these laws are eternal, perfect and unchanging.[[3]](#footnote-3) Therefore, we should not expect miracles, direct revelation from God, or His intervention in our lives.[[4]](#footnote-4) He expects people to care for His creation and develop their own potential. Humans are to accomplish this goal with the aid of reason, which is to be the guiding principle in all respects.

People are to know God by means of reason as well. God has revealed Himself exclusively through so-called “general revelation,” that is, through His work of creation. Consequently, it makes little sense to seek special revelation from God, for example, through religious literature, which is simply a human creation. The Bible of deists is Nature.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nature also provides for the deist a handbook for moral conduct in accordance with the principles of “natural moral law.” Wood describes deism in the following words: “Deism signifies the belief in a single God and in a religious practice founded solely on natural reason rather than on supernatural revelation.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Geisler identifies four different types of deism that hold to the following tenants:[[7]](#footnote-7)

* God created the world and left it to operate by natural laws. He is indifferent to what subsequently happens on earth.
* God is concerned about natural events in the world, but cares little about what people do.
* God is concerned with how people conduct themselves. He requires them to observe the moral law instilled in creation. However, there is no life after death.
* God requires observation of the moral law of creation. There is life after death in an incorporeal form and retribution for deeds done during this life.

**2. Origins**

The following factors led to the rise of deism in the seventeenth century. At that time, science was making exciting discoveries about the existence and operation of natural laws. This resulted in less dependence on God to explain the mysteries of creation and, in time, some began to doubt Divine intervention completely. Deism, then, arose from the desire to accommodate religious faith to new scientific discoveries.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, the epistemological theory “empiricism” was gaining ascendance at that time. According to empiricism, one accepts as true that, which one can perceive with the five senses or prove experimentally. The spread of this worldview further weakened people’s expectation for God’s supernatural intervention.

It is interesting that a leading empiricist of that age, John Locke, unintentionally advanced the cause of deism. Locke wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, in which he sought to defend the reasonable nature of Christian faith. His rationalistic approach, however, inspired other thinkers to employ reason as a rival to faith.[[9]](#footnote-9)

A concern about low morals also contributed to deism’s spread. Deists felt people were relying too much on God’s help in their moral life and, consequently, not applying enough personal discipline toward self-improvement. In addition, people of that time began to rely more and more on reason to resolve moral and ethical problems, that is, to rely on the so-called “natural moral law.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

In addition, Stephen feels that Protestantism contributed to deism’s popularity.[[11]](#footnote-11) In his opinion, Protestantism’s liberation from Catholicism allowed more freethinking, of which rationalists, in turn, took advantage to advance their ideology. Stephen writes, “If Protestantism was unintentionally acting as a screen for rationalism, rationalism naturally expressed itself in terms of Protestantism.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Rationalists sought a “common denominator” between all people as a basis for religious faith. They found such an element in human reason, which all possess. Thus, deism arose as a result of all these factors.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**3. Leading Proponents**

In this section, we will describe how several leading proponents of deism understood this view. The father of English deism is regarded to be Edward Herbert of Cerbury (1583-1648), author of *de Veritate* (*Concerning Truth*). He believed in one Most High God, who instilled in human consciousness certain axioms to direct people’s lives. These axioms can be found in all religions of the world: (1) there is a God, (2) people must worship Him, (3) good works please Him, (4) people must repent of sin, (5) God will reward or punish our behavior, either in this life through the action of natural laws, or in the afterlife.[[14]](#footnote-14) Joyce gives this summary of Herbert’s teaching: he affirmed “competence of human reason to attain certainty with regard to fundamental religious truths, and insistence upon the indissoluble connection between religion and the practical duties of life.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Consequently, Hebert devalued the significance and importance of Divine revelation.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Another famous deist, Matthew Tindale (1657-1733), emphasized God’s general revelation through creation, which he considered the most reliable avenue to knowing God: “Obedience to nature is the one sufficient principle.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Tindale also rejected the notion that God revealed Himself in a special way to just one people group – Israel.[[18]](#footnote-18) He concluded that, since God gave all people reason, then that must be the best test of truth: “The unassisted reason of man is abundantly able to discover the few and simple truths of which genuine religion consists.”[[19]](#footnote-19) According to his observation, followers of the natural moral law behave no worse than believers in written revelation. For Tindale, the four components of genuine religious life are: (1) faith in God, (2) the worship of God, (3) personal happiness, (4) the happiness of others.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Leaving England, deism came ashore on the European continent, especially exerting its influence on France. One of deism’s most ardent defenders was Voltaire. Voltaire gleaned much from Locke and Tindale, yet even before that, he had leanings towards this worldview. It is said of Voltaire, that he was a “deist, one might say, from birth.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Among early American deists, we may mention Thomas Paine (1737-1809), who, like others, rejected special revelation from God.[[22]](#footnote-22) The only way to know God was by employing reason. The universe “reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God,”[[23]](#footnote-23) in particular, his existence, character and demands.

Finally, we will review the convictions of a more contemporary deist, Martin Gardner (1914-2010).[[24]](#footnote-24) He believed in a God who is wise, strong, good, loving, merciful, just, and infinite. Yet, he rejects the idea that God “periodically thrusts a hand into the universe to break the sequence of natural causes and produce a genuine miracle.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

At the same time, Gardner is not opposed to prayer. Yet, the goal of prayer should not be to receive something from God or bring about some change in the natural order. Instead, a deist gives thanks in prayer and asks for forgiveness from God. Gardner joins those deists who hold to an afterlife, but he cannot specify what that entails. Still, he rejects the idea of eternal punishment. As far as the reason for suffering, Gardner remains agnostic. The deist “must believe, again by faith, that in some unfathomable manner which we cannot now understand, perhaps will never understand, the existence of evil is necessary for ultimately bringing about the greatest good.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Finally, along with other deists Gardner shares their optimism for a glorious future for humanity, which the use of reason will introduce. Humanity “has the power to control its own destiny, to minimize (if not eliminate) war, poverty, and other needless suffering – the power to shape a better world.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

The deistic worldview, of course, predates the rise of its popularity in the seventeenth century. Joyce makes note of the deistic mindset of Confucius, who, although he believed in a Higher Being, felt that He does not interact with people, and that people should simply live in accordance with rules and regulations. Joyce also sees hints of deism in Islam. As a rule, Allah distances himself from humanity and requires from it the observance of a high moral standard. In distinction from deism, though, Islam accepts Divine revelation, particularly the Quran.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Although by the nineteenth century deism was already phasing out, its influence is still felt today in the rejection of the miraculous, a critical approach to the Bible, and in the conviction that God, as a rule, does not intervene in our lives.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**4. Support**

Deists support their theory in the following way. First, it is clear that God does not routinely descend from heaven to visit this planet. It seems to them that God is distant and not active in our affairs. Second, scientific discoveries have confirmed the presence and activity of natural laws, which seem to exclude the need for God’s continual and personal intervention. Third, proponents of deism object to the lackadaisical attitude of some believers to their moral and spiritual development. Fourth, this theory offers a new approach to resolving the problem of evil: God is not to blame for evil in the world, but people. It is up to humankind to get to work and solve its problems.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Next, deists feel that what God creates must be perfect, just as He is. Therefore, there is no room for improvement in creation, or the need for God to intervene and “fix” something.[[31]](#footnote-31) Deists draw this analogy:

A perfect machine, it is supposed, would not require from time to time to be adjusted by its maker; nor would the Unchangeable introduce any later corrections into a creation, which from the first reflected His omniscience and omnipotence.[[32]](#footnote-32)

As we mentioned before, in the deistic worldview there are no miracles. Deists claim that there can be no miraculous violation of natural laws, otherwise they would not be “laws.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Human experience confirms that natural processes occur with the required regularity and consistency. Some feel that God could work miracles, but chooses not to. Deists find claims to miracles unlikely and support for their occurrence unconvincing. They explain them away as superstition or deception.[[34]](#footnote-34) Paine argues that our limited understanding of nature leaves us with “no criterion to determine what a miracle is.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

**5. Evaluation**

Although in this system we note such positive features as acknowledging the existence of a Creator and the important role of reason in religious matters, at the same time we encounter some serious difficulties. First, deists believe in God, a personal God, who thinks, feels and acts. If God is indeed personal, then one might expect that He would seek personal fellowship with the creatures He has made, instead of avoiding them. Second, can we consider the world perfect or even potentially perfect, when it is cut off from the Creator, who is the source of all good?

Third, in creation, God demonstrated His concern for His creatures by the masterful way He designed it. If God cares so deeply for His creatures so as to create such a marvelous world for them to inhabit, then why would He fail to express His love in personal ways as well? Joyce adds that if God is indifferent toward His creation, then what motivated Him to create it in the first place?[[36]](#footnote-36) In addition, why would a loving God abandon the world at a time, when it encounters so many seemingly insurmountable problems that require His assistance?

Deists may answer that if God indeed does intervene in our world, then why does He not do so more often?[[37]](#footnote-37) This is the same question we tackled in a previous chapter – the “problem of evil.” The reader can refer to that discussion for a response. Furthermore, millions of people claim to have had personal experience with God, and that He intervenes in their lives in answer to prayer. It is problematic to ascribe all these testimonies to chance or imagination. Jacob Vernet adds that the great variety of reported miracles weights against them being explained by natural laws. There would need to be a great number of still unknown natural laws to explain all these miracle claims.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Geisler argues that if God is sufficiently powerful to create the world, then it presents no difficulty for Him to do “lesser” miracles. In addition, it seems that deists reject miracles *a priori*, that is, as an assumption or axiom in their worldview without sufficient substantiation.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In answer to the claim that a perfect God created a perfect creation that does not need His intervention, we simply have to look at present conditions in the world. We observe problems not only with people’s behavior, but also with the sometimes destructive forces of nature, which are not under human control. It appears that something occurred in God’s “perfect world” that gave rise to these irregularities – the introduction of sin and death. Deists do not factor these features into their worldview.

As far as reliance on natural moral law, we still stand in need of Divine revelation to motivate our observance and guard certain behaviors from neglect. We also note that, although there is supposedly only one natural moral law, which should guarantee uniformity, different societies sometimes have different standards. Even deists do not always agree among themselves about the content of that law.[[40]](#footnote-40) It seems that reason alone is insufficient to establish universal principles of proper behavior.

We also find interesting the results of David Hume’s research in the history of religions. He showed that in periods when people lived only by their own preferences, society regressed into superstition and other errors.[[41]](#footnote-41) It appears again that reason alone is an inadequate guide for life.

Furthermore, deism underestimates sinful tendencies of humans, that is, their incapability to fulfill a moral law.[[42]](#footnote-42) In addition, the promise of rewards and threat of Divine punishment add needed motivation for leading a moral life.[[43]](#footnote-43)

It is also curious that this system quickly fell from favor in Europe, where it first took root. It remained popular only from the late 17th to the late 18th centuries. Stephens attributes its fall to the following:

The true cause of the decay of Deism is to be sought in its internal weakness. The creed was never really alive; it was not rooted in the deepest convictions, nor associated with the most powerful emotions of its adherents. The metaphysical deity was too cold and abstract a conception to excite much zeal in his worshippers.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Stephen further comments, “A religion founded on such precarious evidence can never have the power to command our passions and to push men to martyrdom.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Joyce agrees that such a system lacks ability to motivate devotion to God. There is no personal element. In addition, people develop a spirit of prideful independence and self-reliance, which the religious mind considers not a virtue, but a vice.[[46]](#footnote-46)

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2. Noted in Joyce G. P. Deism // Hastings J. Encyclopedia of religion and ethics. – New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928. – T. 4. – P. 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Geisler, Worlds apart*,* p. 177–178. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some deists feel that God may intervene in the affairs of men, but rarely does so (see Joyce, v. 4, p. 541). Geisler notes that English and American deists are more open to the possibility that, in some sense, God is ready to “exercise a certain degree of providential care over the affairs of human history, yet without miraculous intervention” (See Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 180). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wood A. W. Deism // Jones L. Encyclopedia of religion. – Farmington Hills, MI: MacMillian/Gale, 2005. – V. 4. – P. 2251. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 148–149, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Joyce, v. 4, p. 533. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, p. 534-535. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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17. Stephen, v. 1, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Geisler, Christian apologetics, p. 159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Stephen, v. 1, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Geisler, Christian apologetics, p. 160; Stephen, v. 1, p. 138-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Torry N. L. Voltaire and the English deists. – New Haven, CT: Yale, 1930. – P. 1, 199-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 150–155. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, p. 165-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Gardner М. The whys of a philosophical scrivener. – New York: Quill, 1983. – P. 350, noted in Geisler, Worlds Apart, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid, p. 252 (Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 168). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, p. 122 (Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 168). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Joyce, v. 4, p. 542. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Geisler, Worlds apart*,* p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Geisler, Christian аpologetics, p. 168-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Noted in Casserley J. Т. L. Apologetics and evangelism. – Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1962. – P. 119-120. Also see Craig W. L. Apologetics: An introduction. – Chicago, IL: Moody, 1984. – P. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Noted in Joyce, v. 4, p. 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Noted in Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Joyce, v. 4, p. 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Noted in Helm P. The Providence of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid, p. 107-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Geisler, Worlds apart, p. 181-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Stephen, v. 1, p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Joyce, v. 4, p. 537. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid, v. 4, p. 536. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
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44. Ibid, v. 1, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid, v. 1, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
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