

# ***When God Meets Changes: A Brief Analysis on the Origins of Deism***

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**Abstract:** As the scientific revolution transformed the way people perceived the world, in the 17th century, Deism gradually emerged as an important component of Christian doctrines and had a profound influence on the rise and growth of the Enlightenment. It began as a system of strict intellectualism. Its aim was to remove superstition, miracles and mysteries from religion and to expose the latter to the light of reason. It adhered to the new principle that exclusively reasonable, trustworthy, and substantial evidence for the presence of a Supreme Being as the universe's creator can only be found in empirical reason and observation of the natural world, which was a radical perspective for the time. This paper analyses the multiple origins of Deism from different perspectives, illustrating the circumstances under which Deism initially arose and the factors that led to its emergence from scratch. This paper finds that Deism emerged as a product of the confrontation between theology and science. Neither rejecting science, as traditional Catholic theology does nor erasing the existence of God, as atheism does, it sought to find a balance between the two from the very moment of its origin.

**Keywords:** history, Deism, European history, history of religion

## **1. Introduction**

The Renaissance changed the way people think and live, although in the 16th century this change was only apparent in the way churches were organised and did not penetrate into the substance of spirituality and belief. By the 17th century, science and philosophy were evolving and changing people's views and perceptions of the world in a subtle and profound way. The changes in church hierarchy brought about by the Reformation, the oscillation of Christians between Revelation and Reason, and the skepticism inspired by science, technology and philosophy all combined to lead to the emergence of Deism in England. Over the following years, Deism spread to European countries such as France and Germany, and even to the United States and Latin America. Under the guise of proving the Existence of God, Deism played a crucial role in the history of Enlightenment by emphasising the moral law of the heart, the practice of love for God and neighbour as guided by reason, the perseverance against the corruption in the Church, the elimination of superstition, the questioning of Bible's authority and the striving for liberty of speech [1]. Those principles were instrumental in generating the Enlightenment and even became the guidelines for some Christian theologians and scientists throughout the period. The age of ignorance faded away and the age of enlightenment dawned. Current studies on Deism mostly focus on its influence on political thought and theology during the prime of the Enlightenment, including its spread in Europe and America,

with less attention paid to the original origins of Deism, and most of these studies tend to focus on the evolution of Catholic theology rather than its various contexts. This paper analyses the original use of Deism in texts and the factors and contexts of its emergence, including the religious situation and scientific progress in the 17th century, by compiling readings of the related documents, and thus giving a glimpse of the origins of Deism. Exploring the origins of Deism not only sheds light on the social and religious conditions in 17th-century England and Europe but also provides an insight into the prelude towards the Enlightenment.

## 2. Introduction of Deism

### 2.1. Controversies & Meanings

While it is usually acknowledged as a principle, Deism has no established definition that's fully accepted. It is often portrayed as an inadequate movement that encouraged a negative attitude against religious superstition, which is accurate in a certain sense. It is also frequently interpreted as a form of skepticism and as a reconstruction of Christianity that omits many of its essential characteristics. Scholars possess varying opinions, which makes these definitions all inadequate to a certain extent. Although they diverge, these definitions have one thing in common: they nearly entirely portray Deism as being different from or at odds with any acceptable norm. Therefore, many modern historians agree that Deism was a period in the development of religious philosophy, a phase that's relatively new; as such, it should be understood historically in relation to the philosophical currents of the time during which it was most influential [2].

It is for this reason that this paper will not dwell much on the specific definition of Deism, but rather, in the spirit of exploring its origins, will elaborate on its early lexical meaning and the theoretical content of the exponents who were later known as the Deists.

The literally initial origins of Deism or deistical thinking can be traced back to ancient times, but the word Deism, derived from the Latin word *Deus* which means 'god', was only first counted as known by people until the 17th century when Lord Herbert of Cherbury's book *De Veritate (On Truth, as It Is Distinguished from Revelation, the Probable, the Possible, and the False)* was published in 1624. A while before that, the term *déiste* first appeared in French in a work by a Swiss Calvinist named Pierre Viret in 1564, but it wasn't publicly recognised in France either until Pierre Bayle's famed Dictionary was released in the 1690s and had an entry on Viret. "Prior to the 17th Century, the terms *deism* and *deist* were used interchangeably with the terms *theism* and *theist*, which are generally acknowledged as the belief in god and the people who hold that [3,4]. It was the case until later on in the 17th century, philosophers and theologians began to approach the phrases differently, and it was then that Deism and Deists started to gain their true identity in historiography.

### 2.2. Earliest Deists & Their Belief

As mentioned earlier, the definition of Deism has been obscured by historians under various controversies, which makes it unlikely to depict it with a correctly established set of words. This paper will therefore take the ideas those pioneer Deists held, viz., the prevalent theory of theirs when Deism first started as previously noted, as the answer to the question of what it is.

One of the earliest and greatest Deists was Herbert of Cherry, the author of *De Veritate*. While numerous more renowned Deists emerged during the subsequent glory days of English Deism, including Locke and Tindal, who produced some of the most influential works of early Deism, Herbert's foundational, inspirational significance cannot be denied. Deism was first introduced to the British people and the philosophical world through his work, and to this day he is still known as "the father of Deism", despite the fact that at first Herbert's adherents were not considered as large as they were later.

The five *notitiae communes*—Common Notions as which Herbert referred to universally accepted truths presented in his work, which unified all religious beliefs at the time, were also to be considered the theoretical principles on the early stages of Deism. It is so rigorous and subtle that almost every subsequent theoretical branch of Deism could find its roots in it. Besides that, Herbert separated intrinsic and revealed facts from truths derived from experience and reasoning about the experience. One's mind is imprinted with innate truths, as shown by the fact that everyone accepts them. Based on these ideas, he created his most famous and instructional work of all time, with the first two-thirds of the book devoted to his theory of knowledge as the first Deist ever known [5,6]. Throughout his words, he revealed the basic standpoint held by Deists that Reason precedes Revelation.

At the time of Deism, different theories were flourishing, with representative strands of different emphases derived from the groundwork of Newton's theory of physics, based on a common kernel, which depicts God as the world's Creator, who then become distant and uninterested in it and its problems [2]. Notably, although this interpretation appears to be as well conceived as it was, it lacks sufficient foundation since the Deists scarcely touched philosophical problems when it first started. In the 17th century, Deism grew almost rapidly, at an astonishing pace, from its germ to its zenith. It is fortunate, to say the least, however, as its spiritual content is evident, and thus it is not confusing to find a trace in the study of early Deism.

In these contexts above, Herbert's notions and his arguments about truths gradually became the representative tenets shared by the early Deists, viz., the true original content of Deism that this paper attempts to illustrate.

### **3. The Emergence of Deism**

#### **3.1. Religious Circumstance & Theological Roots**

Deism in the Age of Enlightenment was ambitious in a way, as some scholars even expressed in their studies, that God, though still nominally supreme as creator and sovereign of the world, had in fact been replaced by Reason itself, making himself a mere puppet pulled by the strands of Reason [7]. Such a view is reasonable given this context, but it should be noticed that in the early stages of Deism, the situation was different. Deism was born under the pen of the theologians, and every transformative view expressed of Deism was under the name of faith and God.

It is also evident from Herbert's work that Deism was never born separate from the context of theology and faith. It ran deep in Christian theology, and successfully took it as its most exquisite cover.

The emergence of Deism was closely linked to the Reformation. From the Elizabethan era onwards, the Crown took the route of suppressing both Catholicism and Puritanism, with the Anglican Church leading the way in the suppression of Catholic theology and tradition in an attempt to remove the 'superstitious' elements. This included the reform of the sacraments and the abandonment of miracle, while reason and the knowledge of the laws of nature became the first choice to break down superstition. Later, frequent religious interactions between England and the Netherlands led to a discussion of the Trinity, a discussion that was spread from the Netherlands to England, and from which Deism was born.

The British Civil War had led to frequent conflicts between church and state, and rationalism was no longer subordinate to religion; rationalism led to the rise of Deism and even Atheism, which was a serious shock to Trinitarian Christianity. In a sense, therefore, the subsequent rise of Deism was also motivated by the need to defend Christian theology since it was at least a belief that admitted God.

Back in time to the religious interactions between the Netherlands and England, the arrival of the Socinians, who believed that values were more important than faith, optimistic about human nature,

and attached great importance to the use of reason in theology, played a crucial role in shaping the theological attitude of Deism. The Socinians believed that the moral content of religion was more important than doctrine and ritual, and that reason should play a great role, which is what Deists then embraced [1]. The Deists incorporated anti-trinitarian ideas such as those of the Socinians, amplifying the role of reason over the original, boldly downgrading the status of revelation, and eventually becoming a new school of thought in a sense.

### 3.2. Motivation from Science Revolution

The scientific revolution reached a new level of significance. Some scholars still believe that "science" itself does not evolve in leaps and bounds because it is a process of continuous accumulation. But no one would deny that the scientific revolution brought about a fundamental change in the way people thought and lived at the time.

The scientific revolution began in earnest with the publication of Copernicus' *Treatise on the Movement of the Heavens* in 1543, which led to a dramatic change in cosmology and the dawn of astronomy. This was followed by a frenzy of enthusiasm for astronomy, physics and other sciences, as well as by technological developments and innovations. Productivity and productivity were greatly increased, and relations of production were altered. Capitalism grew rapidly and the entire society was being reformed.

The way people perceived the universe changed, and with it, people devoted more to themselves rather than to the divine images. People were drawn back to earth and their minds were liberated. These became the breeding ground for the development of a theism that valued reason, which was Deism at the time. Deists sought to blend the doctrines with the scientific knowledge of nature, thus creating a new image of God and building a theological system on the truths of science. And this spirit was widely carried forward by subsequent Deists, especially those who were also renowned as scientists, such as Isaac Newton, who believed that "God is an Eternal, Infinite, Independent, Intellectual Being who made the world but not at all concern himself in the government of the world [8]."

However, it should be mentioned that whilst the emergence of Deism demonstrated the rapid development of science, it still to some extent illustrated the objectively undeveloped processes of science at the time and the remaining constraints on the minds of the people under the Christian belief system. It can be regarded as relatively innovative on an ideological level, but it was also conservative in the early years of its existence. Nevertheless, the author still considers that the relationship between Deism and science at the time was very subtle, in that they both had a faith in each other and drove each other forward, and indeed in a sense contributed to the further development of each other.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper mainly focuses on the early 17th century and analyses the origins of Deism. The birth of Deism was a natural consequence of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the scientific revolution. The term came from ancient cultures, but throughout its history, it has gradually departed from its original meaning to become something unique. In a sense, it was really born in the 17th century under the pen of an English courtier and really played its own role in this land.

Embraced by the Reformation and supported by the evolution of science, Deism flourished and made its name in history. It was a guide for people to free themselves from ignorance and liberate themselves. Deists were, in a way, the ones who actually unveiled the Enlightenment, as it was the end of an era of ignorance and the beginning of an era of free thinking and emancipation of humanity.

Given the limited space available, this paper only briefly analyses the origins of deism on the background of the times and early beliefs. In fact, the emergence of Deism was also linked to previous

philosophical schools, political ideologies and other theological schools that had gained popularity, which due to their intricacy, are only briefly mentioned in the abstract and introduction. The author would like to see and produce more detailed studies on the subject in the future.

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