
DEISM

From the late 17th century, a new way of thinking about God and religion emerged. This was deism, and it was a radical shift away from traditional religious belief and the authority of the Church. For deists, the complicated rituals and demands of organised religion were unnecessary. Instead, they believed that questions about the existence and nature of a god were best approached through **reason** and by observing the **natural world**.

In encouraging people to **think for themselves** when it came to ideas about God and the Church, this new approach had a significant impact on the development of greater freedom of religion and belief. By removing the idea that a god intervened in people's lives – by answering prayers or performing miracles – it also created more of a focus on personal **responsibility**.

My own mind is my own church.

Thomas Paine
The Age of Reason (1794)

Thomas Paine by Laurent Dabos, c. 1791 © National Portrait Gallery, London



Deist: someone who believes in a single god who created the world but does not act to influence events.

Freethinker: someone who forms their own opinions and beliefs, rather than just accepting what is officially or commonly believed and taught.

THE DEISTS' GOD

Deists were not atheists: they believed in a creator god. It's important to remember that this was over a century before the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, so many people still felt that a god was the only rational explanation for the wonder and complexity of the natural world. For many deists it was the **argument from design** that therefore motivated their belief in a god.

However, the deists' god was not one who intervened in human affairs. A popular analogy used by deists was that of a '**clockmaker**' god, who had created the universe as a perfect, intricate machine, governed by unchanging natural laws, and then left it to run on its own without interference.

This meant that deists rejected the idea of miracles, prophecies, and divine revelations found in the Bible. They believed these were often **superstitions** created by priests to control people. Instead, they argued that humans could understand the world and work out how to live moral lives simply by using their intelligence and observing the world around them. This was a revolutionary idea at a time when the Church held immense power and blasphemy could be a dangerous crime.

SOME KEY THINKERS

Many of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment were deists. Their ideas helped to shape modern ideas about democracy, human rights, and religious freedom. Many see them as important influences on modern humanism and as people who paved a path towards the freedom to be non-religious.

John Toland (1670–1722)

John Toland was an influential Irish freethinker and philosopher who championed the use of reason in understanding religion. His book *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) is considered one of the key deist texts. He argued that virtue alone was sufficient for a happy life and that religious doctrines should not be mysterious but accessible to human understanding. Toland was one of the first people to be called a '**freethinker**,' a word which came to be used more and more to describe deists and other sceptical thinkers.

Émilie du Châtelet (1706–1749)

Émilie du Châtelet was an important French mathematician and physicist. She believed that religious ideas should be based on **reason** rather than revelation, and her deism was closely linked with her scientific work. She argued that God could be understood by studying laws of nature.

David Williams (1738–1816)

David Williams was a Welsh philosopher who promoted a 'religion of nature.' He believed that shared moral principles, understood through reason, could unite people. Williams rejected biblical revelation and argued against state-enforced religion, championing the right of individuals to apply their own reason to spiritual matters. His belief that **morality** stems from reason and humanity, rather than fear of punishment, and his efforts to create a secular basis for community, anticipated the ideals of the later humanist and Ethical movements.

**With regard to God...
he is outside the world.**

Émilie du Châtelet
Foundations of Physics (1740)



Émilie du Châtelet by Maurice Quentin de La Tour

Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

English-born political activist Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* was hugely influential in the American Revolution. His later book, *The Age of Reason*, challenged traditional Christianity and promoted deism. He wrote: 'I believe in the **equality** of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.'