

Theism vs. Deism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson looks at the concepts of theism and deism. It identifies how they are applied to religious studies. You will also look at how they might be different and similar. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [The Difference between Theism and Deism](#)
2. [Newtonian Deism](#)
3. [Jeffersonian Deism](#)
4. [Vaishnavism](#)

1. The Difference between Theism and Deism

Theism comes from the Greek word meaning God, “theos.” **Deism** comes from the Latin word “Deus,” which also means God. They both refer to some kind of understanding of the relationship to the divine.

Very generally, theism is usually applied to both monotheistic and polytheistic systems. Deism is most often used in reference to monotheistic systems. However, it can apply to polytheism as well. A term that was coined in the early 20th century is polydeism, and it’s usually referred to as a subcategory of polytheism.

Theism is the belief in a personal god who seeks to have a personal relationship with all or some human beings. This can be either a direct or an indirect relationship. Deism, on the other hand, is the belief in an impersonal god who created and oversees the universe but who neither has nor desires to have a personal relationship with human beings.



BIG IDEA

The key component is a personal relationship or no personal relationship.



TERMS TO KNOW

Theism

The belief in a personal god who seeks to have a personal relationship with all or some human beings.

Deism

The belief in an impersonal god who created and oversees the universe but who neither has nor desires to have a personal relationship with human beings.

2. Newtonian Deism

Christianity is a theistic religion. It's a monotheistic religion based on the belief in one God who created the world and influences its processes. The direct or indirect involvement He may have with individuals depends on the perspective of different branches of Christianity.

The term deism began to be applied to Christianity around the beginning of the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Reason, and the Enlightenment. It was a time when human rationality, ingenuity, and agency were beginning to take center stage. In the field of religion, particularly among Protestant thinkers in northern Europe and England, the term deism was applied.

The general belief that was shared among deists was that God still functioned as an omnipotent creator but that he was more of a grand architect or divine watchmaker. All the pieces were put in place and natural laws keep things running. These laws were being explained by Newtonian science, and this form of deism became known as Newtonian deism. The thinking went that it was up to humans, with the agency of science and reason, to explain and experiment with these laws.

3. Jeffersonian Deism

One of the experiments was American democracy. Thomas Jefferson and the other founding fathers of the United States had various commitments to the ideals of deism. This form of deism is slightly different from the watchmaker god of Newtonian deism in that it ascribes to a belief in divine Providence.

This was the idea that God is invested in and supports worthy causes that are moral and just, such as American independence from Great Britain. Because a deistic worldview was closely associated with Enlightenment philosophy, Thomas Jefferson and others could support the idea of religious freedom and certain forms of individualism that were important in this emerging context. This became known as Jeffersonian deism.

4. Vaishnavism

Theism is predominantly applied to the Western monotheistic religions, but the more you explore, the more you'll see that it's not always that cut and dry. There are Eastern religions that are theistic, such as some branches of Hinduism.

Vaishnavism is a founding branch of India's indigenous Hindu religion. Followers of Vaishnavism are devoted to the personal god Vishnu and his avatar or manifestation, Krishna. Vaishnavism has a very colorful cosmology in which Lord Vishnu's divine work and personalities are happily involved in the universe, the world, and the lives of devotees.



SUMMARY

The difference between theism and deism is whether there is a personal relationship or no personal relationship with God. You looked at two examples of deism. **Newtonian deism** envisions God as a watchmaker or grand architect who sets things up and then allows natural laws to function as they will. **Jeffersonian deism** is the idea that there's some kind of divine Providence where God is invested in worthy, just, and moral efforts, such as the American independence from Great Britain. **Vaishnavism** is a branch of Hinduism, and was used as an example of theism in the East.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Deism

The belief in an impersonal god who created and oversees the universe, but who neither has nor desires to have a personal relationship with human beings.

Theism

The belief in a personal god who seeks to have a personal relationship with all or some human beings.