



Possible Deist Thought in Ancient Egypt

By Brandon Norgaard

I don't know if there are very many statements that hold for all people who consider themselves to be Deists, but it is certainly the case that for *most* Deists, God is thought of as a unifying force in the universe, a higher power above all creation, the cause of all things that Itself was not caused to be. Deists have reasons for believing in such a God. Though Deism as an organized movement has only existed in recent centuries, the reasons for believing in a higher power that is the creator of the universe have been around as long as there have been intelligent people who can think about these reasons.

Looking at the history of religious beliefs since the earliest human civilizations, it is probably safe to say that all cultures began with some form of polytheism. Every early society needed deities to explain all kinds of phenomena including the weather, fertility, food, wine, war, the sun, love, etc. These early people had a need to explain different aspects of their lives and for everything that needed to be explained, they could create a god for it. Now, at a certain point in the history of Western civilization, monotheism became popular and eventually hegemonic. It is popularly thought that the common belief in some form of monotheism



Welcome to the Summer Issue of the Deist Alliance Quarterly Newsletter. This quarter there is no particular theme.

The authors let their thoughts run free.

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The Purpose of Life

By Joel Axenroth

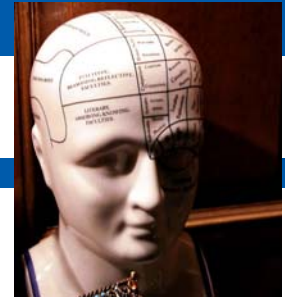
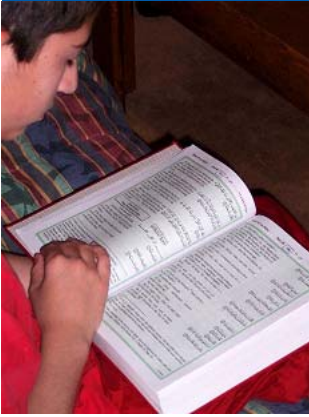
One of the attributes that separates us from the other animals is man's inherent need to question practically everything. And our capability to think abstractly makes such questioning practical. The cow does not question why the sun rises in the morning, nor does the bird ask why the rain falls. Both simply accept that such events occur, but man wants to know not only *what* is going on but *why* each event occurs. And if man fails to find actual answers, he will create his own answers. It is a matter of record that early man resorted to myth and legend to explain the sun's travel across the heavens or the appearance of a rainbow. Over time, our understanding increased. Legend was replaced by scientific theory. Apollo no longer drives his golden chariot across the morning sky; we know the earth revolves around the sun, and we are able to calculate the mass and characteristics of both.

But in the case of some questions we still turn to myth and legend. Why are we here? What is the purpose of life, and

what is its meaning? We have asked these questions, but science has failed to provide answers that can be verified by experimentation, so we have been left to invent our own answers. Some consider our invented answers to be hallowed by claiming they have divine origin. Some think that long tradition (and at times fanatical adherents) validate these invented answers. But in truth we should not just invent something. We should seek new and fresh answers whenever questions remain unsettled. We smile with amusement at the naïveté of the early Greeks and their myths, and yet we place our faith in a Bible or Qur'an, even though the stories in these holy texts are just as fantastic and mythical as anything the Greeks believed. We have replaced one implausible myth with another only slightly more plausible.

Yet these questions deserve and, indeed, require answers and failing to find them, man will invent answers or will turn to the inventions of others to fill this perceived gap in our knowledge. These are the great questions of life, the ones beside which all others pale in significance. For if we do not understand why we are here or what our purpose in life might be, what does it matter whether Apollo drives his chariot or the earth revolves around the sun?

What I offer below is my version of the meaning of life, our purpose here on earth, and my reasoning for my beliefs. I make no claims of divine origin or heavenly revelation, nor do



I claim that what I am submitting is infallible, or even accurate, for that matter. What I offer instead is one possible set of answers formulated from my own understanding. These notions based on deductive reasoning and anecdotal evidence and cannot be proved by scientific methods. All mistakes are my own.

One of the central tenets of Deism, if Deism can be said to have any central tenets, is that the universe and life as we understand, are far too complex, too interrelated, and too structured to have evolved by random chance. We believe, as Deists, in a designer or a creator. We believe in God, or Nature's God if you prefer, that stands at the base of all creation. Yet if we accept the premise that the universe, the Earth, and man are all the end result of rational design, then should we not also assume that there is a purpose to this design? If we dismiss the concept of random creation, can we then blithely dismiss the concept of purposeless creation as well? I think not. If there is logic and reason behind creation, if there is a natural order to the universe and all that it contains, then there must be a purpose behind this creation: the universe, the Earth, and man as well.

Can we answer this question? I think if Deism is to have any meaning in the modern world, if it is to offer anything to man beyond the concept that individuals should think for themselves and not rely on the stale dogma of others, then Deism must at least *try* to provide an answer. For if we fail to even offer a theory on the greater questions of life, would this failure not be an invitation for others to debate, reject, twist, distort,

and lie about what are we offering? Ultimately, if a philosophy offers no answers to life's most important questions, isn't that philosophy a bit hollow?

We know our time on earth is finite and, in the larger scheme of things, of extremely short duration. I find it hard to accept that, with an estimated age of the universe of almost 14 billion years, almost 14 billion years were needed for us to reach the point at which we had evolved into beings capable of creating and disseminating and discussing this essay. Imagine, 14 billion years of directed creation and evolution were required for us to exist, and then the sum total of our existence is just 75 years, give or take a few years. Those 75 years represent about five trillionths of the total time the universe has existed. Even if we are not one of creation's goals, but merely a by-product of a larger scheme, do we really think five trillionths is all we were created for? Or is it instead logical to assume that our total span of existence somehow transcends our physical time on Earth? Personally, this is the conclusion I draw, but others could as

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in the modern world can be traced back to Judaism. It is true that Christianity and Islam derive, in large part, from Judaism and the modern Deist movement has its origins in Enlightenment-era freethinking Christians. The Bible says that God chose to reveal himself to the Israelites, but in truth monotheism existed before the time of Moses. Historical evidence shows that it is likely that the Israelites were inspired to take up monotheism from their exposure to a certain denomination of Egyptian religion.

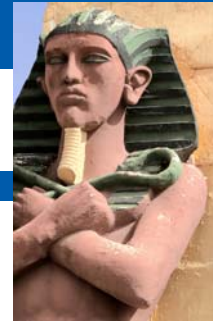
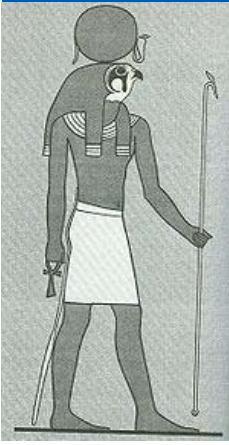
Egyptian culture is very old, with written sources going all the way back to 3000 BC. For most of its history, Egyptian religion was polytheistic. They had many gods, including Ptah, Isis, Osiris, Horus, Amun, Ra, etc. The deity that was considered to be the greatest changed several times

over the centuries and was usually determined by the decisions of the ruling pharaoh and the priests who supported him or her and gave legitimacy to their rule. By about 1400 BC, the main god was Amun-Ra, who was a combination of the older gods Amun and Ra. This god was always depicted with a sun disk over his head. This depiction of the sun was known as Aten.

Around the year 1350 BC, the pharaoh at the time, Akhenaten, decided that Egypt should become monotheistic. Instead of having so many gods including Amun Ra and others, everyone should worship the sun, which was only depicted as a disk when drawn, rather than having human form. This is speculation, but Akhenaten may have gone through similar reasoning as modern Deists have in reaching this conclusion. Modern Deists reason that everything in the universe must come from the same source, and thus it makes sense for there to be a single creator that can be called God. The sun is a natural symbol for this source because all life on earth is a product of the energy that comes from it. Akhenaten might have realized that it makes little sense to think of there being humanlike gods competing with each other for our affection. He may have realized that it makes more sense to think of there being one God, the creator of all things, and itself not humanlike, but something beyond what we can truly understand.

Akhenaten named his son Tutankhaten, which means “the living image of Aten”. This name was not intended to be taken literally, since Aten does not have a humanlike image, but probably was meant to signify that this child was designated by the one true

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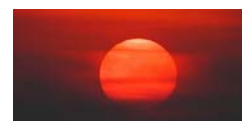


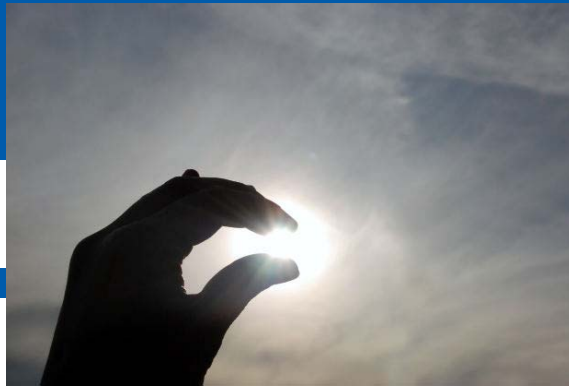
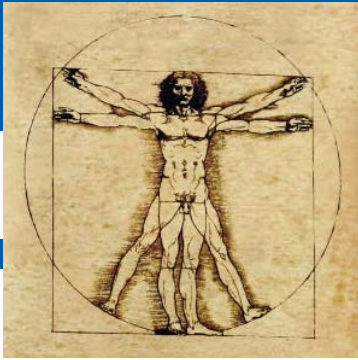
God Aten as the next leader of Egypt. Akhenaten's decision caused the priests of Amun-Ra to lose much of the power they once had, and this angered them. Akhenaten died when Tutankhaten was still young and they convinced him to restore the previous religious traditions. He complied with this and brought back the main god Amun-Ra and all of the other gods as well. He also changed his own name to Tutankhamun, which means "the living image of Amun". This man is, of course, the famous King Tut.

The period of monotheism did not last long in Egypt, but it was during this time that the Egyptians had Semitic slaves, possibly including the ancient Israelite people. The Bible tells of the Israelites being held captive and enslaved in Egypt and later being able to leave and set up a kingdom in the land of Palestine. Now, the Bible is quite unreliable as a historical source, and Deists know this well. At the same time, there are some events in the Bible that have been independently verified. Though it is unknown if the Israelites were ever actually slaves in Egypt, it is reasonable to conclude that if they did, they were there around the the 1300's BC. If they were in Egypt at this time, then it is reasonable to conclude that they learned the religion of the Egyptians as it was at this time, which might have been monotheistic.

It is known from historical records that the original

religion of the Semitic peoples, from which the Israelites came, was polytheistic. So it is reasonable to conclude that the Israelites learned monotheism, the belief in one God, from their exposure to the Egyptians during this time in history. Monotheism is very widely believed throughout the world today, and this might partially come from the reformist thought of the pharaoh Akhenaten. Though Jews, Christians, and Muslims trace their faith back to the prophets who supposedly spoke directly to God, this belief is unjustified based on scientific and historical evidence. There is evidence that the belief in one God can be traced further back than any Israelite prophets. Thus these three religions, and even modern Deism, could have origins going all the way back to ancient Egypt and the theology of Akhenaten. With this in mind, modern Deists can take inspiration from Akhenaten and can think of the sun as being a symbol of the one God that created the universe.





easily draw another conclusion since I offer no solid proof.

If we assume that the span of our existence transcends our physical time on Earth, we can only speculate about the nature of our existence after this one. We know our physical, corporal, bodies will die and remain here on Earth, so we can state with some level of certainty that our current physical existence will cease. We have now entered the realm of speculation. We can neither prove nor disprove the notion of gaining another physical existence, but we can at least assume that we will retain a spiritual, emotional, or intellectual existence. If we assume our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and related capabilities will be retained and will transcend this existence, and if we assume that our physical or corporeal existence will not transcend, then can we not then assume that our purpose on Earth is related to those transcendent aspects and not to our corporeal features?

Using these assumptions as a base can help us determine which aspects of our current existence will be retained and which will be discarded. We know our physical bodies will remain behind, as do all material possessions, so can we not discard the notion that material possessions are a part of our purpose in life? Why would the purpose of life be to collect items that we would ultimately discard? Do not the billionaire and the pauper both enter the next stage of existence with an equal amount of material possessions?

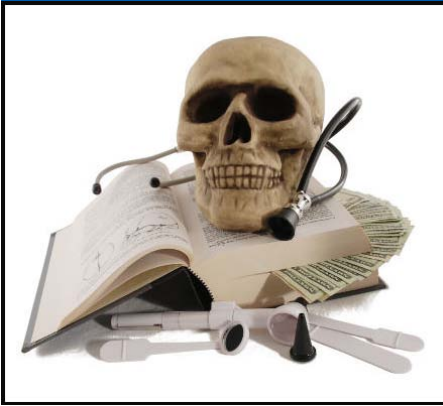
What of our enjoyment of physical possessions? During our time on Earth do they not bring us much pleasure and happiness? I contend that they can, but given the limited nature

of our physical existence, they are not of lasting value. Of what relative value is pleasure if it lasts for the merest blink of an eye? I do not discount the importance of pleasure, nor do I think our existence should be one of joyless toil, but I think pleasure and happiness derived from material possessions will ultimately prove as fragile as those material possessions themselves.

So if our physical bodies and our physical existence end, and all our physical possessions as well, why do we need them in the first place? If we assume creation exists for a reason, then our physical bodies and the physical world we inhabit must also have a reason. If we are, as has been stated elsewhere, spiritual creatures having a physical experience what is the purpose of that physical experience?

This question hints at the larger question of the purpose of life. So let us look at what aspects of our total existence transcend our mere physical existence. If we assume that we retain our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual capabilities, then any attributes of these capabilities should be retained. So if we learn self-control, the ability to control our emotions and physical

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desires, we should retain the attribute of self-control. If we learn compassion, putting the welfare of others above our own, we should retain compassion as well. If we learn that self-gratification is ultimately self-defeating we can retain this knowledge as well.

But what is unique about our physical existence that allows us to learn and retain these teachings? I think it is physical existence itself that serves as our teacher. How can we have physical craving without a body to experience craving? How can we experience physical pleasure and pain without a physical existence? How can we learn to develop self-control and rise above addictions if we do not have a physical body to experience the pangs of addiction? How can we learn to share our physical possessions with those less fortunate without experiencing the comfort and pleasure that those physical possessions bring? How can we learn not to oppress others unless we have a physical existence that makes oppression possible? How can we have compassion for another person's pain and suffering when we

have never experienced pain and suffering ourselves?

In short, without a physical existence to provide the experiences that train our spiritual and intellectual side, how can our spiritual and intellectual existence grow and develop to their fullest potential?

So my contention is that the purpose of man's existence on Earth is to experience and learn those character traits that require a physical existence to develop into future spiritual attributes. These are attributes that we then retain when our all too limited time on Earth comes to an end. So in my mind Earth is effectively a school, perhaps one of many schools we may attend, a school that molds us and develops our potential to become something that is yet unknown.





Deism Evolved

By Chuck Clendenen

A salient feature of the Army writing program is "bottom line up front", meaning that the writer should get to the point right away. In that spirit I must announce that this will be my last issue as editor of Deism Today. I would like to share with you my reasons for passing the baton as well as some commentary about where I think Deism is these days.

I believe religious thought and spirituality are important, and I believe that reason should prevail. I am a Deist, and, like Paine, I shall remain a Deist as long as I draw breath. To me, Deism is more than just talking about the possible or probable existence of God; Deism has to be a philosophy to live by. To become a complete philosophy, Deism must evolve into something you do and something you are, not just something you talk about. There is still work to be done in this area before there is a common understanding of what it is to live as a Deist.

Deism has been evolving. Deism is quite adaptable to change. We know that in nature environments change, and species must adapt to these changes or perish. Some adaptations are successful, and if the environmental change persists long enough, and if the variation from the original species is significant, an entirely new species may emerge.

And so it is with Deism. Today's Deism is so much more than yesterday's. Yesterday's Deism expended much of its energy debunking the Bible and the sacred texts of other revealed

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religions. The flaws and contradictions in those texts have been identified, and anyone who knows how to use a search engine can discover all there is to know about the Bible's errors. This allows for a rapid transition from running away from something to running towards something. Don't get me wrong. Some people commit horrendous acts in the name of religion, and we cannot be silent when people commit outrageous acts in the name of God. But we should criticize what people do, not what they believe unless they believe they should act in barbaric ways.

There are a large and growing numbers of people who call themselves Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR). Deists fit into this category. We are reason-based SBNR. Deism is natural religion, which is reasoned spirituality. Natural religion is reason-based belief in a higher power based on our observations of nature and our own experiences. As the name suggests, natural religion is entirely natural and reasonable. What other form of spirituality or religious belief come to us so naturally? Do you know any other form of belief that people adopt as their own before even knowing that it has a name?

Interestingly, some who cast aside their former beliefs in favor of reason continue to evolve right through Deism and on to something else on the other side. These folks embrace Deism and are overjoyed at the prospect of having a name for their beliefs, but for some reason the satisfaction does not last, and they move on. Even the people who once were the unquestioned leaders in modern Deism have moved on, and I have speculated why before.

I have always felt that Deists have as strong a need for community as anyone else, but many Deists carry their aversion to

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dogma too far and resist any sort of organization at all. This makes building a community of Deists difficult, but some of us have taken yet another step in that process.

The first thing we back in January 2010 did was to collaborate on a set of principles that we could all agree on. Then we started building an online community. We started building a social network, something more than just a discussion forum. We called it Unified Deism, and people joined. But the technology was not solid, so we felt some growing pains. It was a "two steps forward, one step back" process. We lost a few members along the way, but we prevailed, and we are still growing.

We are now the Center for Reasoned Spirituality. We have become a nonprofit corporation. We will be filing for 501(c)(3) status with the IRS. We will be an educational foundation with a charitable outreach.

And yes, we are still Deists. This is Deism Evolved. This is Reason and Spirit United. We are Deists, and we are learning to be a little bit more.

I still hold to my original Church of Nature's God concept (believing as I do that we must have a cadre available to minister to the needs of individual Deists), and I remain a member of the Deist Alliance. But I am a finite being. All things must be brought into balance. Family comes first. Work, the kind that produces an income to sustain the family, must come second, especially in this economy. For Reasoned Spirituality comes third, and the Deist Alliance (Nature's God, Positive Deism, etc.), along with

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The Deist Alliance has been a noble cause, and it hope for us to be a continued success. I believe the Center for Reasoned Spirituality ultimately will benefit even more people, and I am working hard towards making it a success.

SBNR.org and a whole bunch of other activities get time when I can afford to make them priorities.

And so I am ready to pass the reigns. I will give all the support that I can to whoever wants to pick things up and carry on. The Deist Alliance is a noble and worthy cause, and it hope for us to be a continued success. I believe the Center for Reasoned Spirituality ultimately will benefit even more people, and I am currently working very hard towards making it a success.

And so you see why I am passing the baton. It is time for fresh blood and new energy to make the newsletter sing again. I am practicing on a new symphony and cannot give this newsletter the attention it deserves. I will continue to contribute, but it is time for someone else to lead, and I will follow.

Thank you for your confidence and support over the years. Being editor has been a wonderful experience.

Yours in reason,

Chuck



We are looking for great ideas. We are looking for YOU!

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Deist Alliance

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