

# Deism Today...

The Deist Alliance Quarterly Newsletter...



Volume 2, Section 1, March 1, 2007

## Weekly Chats...

Unless otherwise noted weekly chats will be held on Friday evenings at 10:00 p.m. central time. You can join in on the chat by going here...

[www.positivedeism.com/chat](http://www.positivedeism.com/chat)

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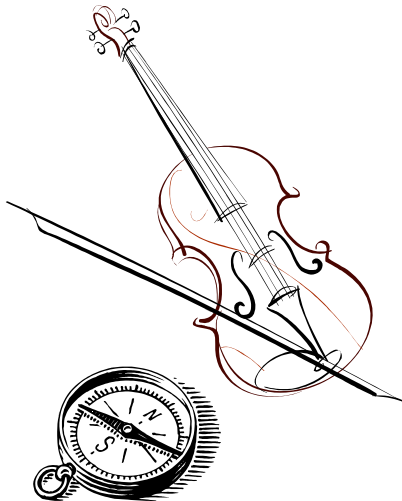
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## *The Compass and the Violin...*

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There once was a young boy, about 4 or 5 years old. His father gave him a present... a magnetic compass. It was magic! No matter where he went, it always pointed in the same direction! He could shake it, turn it upside down, run behind a tree or in another room, and it always pointed in the same direction... towards some mystical, magical place his father called "north".

Later in his life, the man this boy became would tell this story over and over as the moment when he decided there "had to be something behind things, something deeply hidden" It was also in this moment that this young boy decided to discover just what this hidden thing was.

As this young, bright eyed son of non-practicing Jewish parents grew up, he had to decide how he would seek this invisible, hidden force that made his compass needle move. As he grew older, he discovered more wonders, such as the beauty and purity of mathematics, but also similar beauty and purity in the music of Mozart he played on a violin his father had given him.

From the earliest age, this young boy knew that neither science alone, nor religion alone could answer the questions in his mind... could reveal for him the "*invisible, hidden things*", the magical world to which his compass needle pointed. He realized that if he was to understand, he would need to explore the magic of the compass and the magic of the violin together.

One of the most commonly perceived conflicts of western society is that of Science and Religion. It has been fought for over a century, and its roots go back much, much further. From the condemnation of Darwin and the Scopes monkey trial to today's efforts to put warning labels on High School Science texts, the "us vs. them" view of science and religion seeps into many aspects of our lives. From fundamentalists of many faiths who claim that hurricanes are punishments from God, to scientific advancements that are turned into death and destruction, the division between these two aspects of our nature has done, and continues to do incredible harm.

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## *Denominationalism within Deism...*

I believe that denominationalism within Deism is inevitable. In fact, we already see it occurring. We see anti-Christian Deism, non-anti-Christian Deism, Christian Deism, Fundamentalist Deism, Green Deism, Golden Deism, Modern Deism, Positive Deism, Dynamic Deism, etc.

Even within these various Deist denominations, people don't agree on everything. How can we expect people from all of the Deist denominations to come together in agreement as one enormous Deist group? I don't believe we can. I think this is precisely the reason that Christianity developed into various denominations. It's only natural that like-minded people will group together.

I don't think this trend is necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it has a number of good implications. It means that Deists have a choice of what type of Deism they are interested in becoming involved with. It means that non-Deists won't easily be able to attack Deism in general. They would have to focus on a particular type of Deism, because not all Deists have the same ideology.

Within Christianity, you see the same thing. There are some Christian denominations that are very political, some are very fundamentalist, some are very social, some are very evangelical. Some believe in biblical inerrancy. While some prefer a more non-literal interpretation, you can't pigeon-hole all Christians in the same box. Neither can you pigeon-hole all Deists in the same box.

So what does this mean in the context of the growth and promotion of Deism? I'm beginning to be of the opinion that maybe we, as Deists, should simply start focusing on promoting our own particular brands of Deism. Do Catholics promote Methodists, or Baptists? Do Baptists promote Charismatics or Pentecostals? No. We

don't see that. Each denomination focuses on promoting their own denomination. I think this is the same path that will naturally happen within Deism as well. Some Deist denominations will grow, others will fade. Some Deist denominations will appeal to a more mainstream audience, while others remain on the fringe.



But the point is, if we begin to focus on developing, promoting and growing our own Deist 'denominations', then I think Deism as a whole will benefit. People will have choices within Deist ideologies. They will be able to "shop around" to find Deist communities where they are the most comfortable and find the best fit for themselves. There will be choices available, and choice is a good thing.

At first blush, one would think that having Deist denominations would be divisive, and would weaken Deism. But I would suggest that it very well could have the exact opposite effect. It gives people far more choices for finding a Deist community where they can find fellowship with other like-minded people within the broad umbrella of Deism. And as a result, Deism as a whole grows and prospers.

~Steve Dowell

## *Deist Alliance Links and News...*

### *Deist Alliance Member Sites...*

- **PONDER: Presence On the Net of Deists for Enlightenment and Reason...**  
Promoting Deism and Deists' Communications Worldwide  
<http://www.deistnet.com>
- **Modern Deism: Reason, Nature, Free Thought, Liberty, and Respect...**  
<http://www.moderndeism.com>
- **Deist.Info...**  
<http://www.deist.info>
- **POSITIVE DEISM: Promoting Online Deist Community and Friendship...**  
"Reason and Respect in all you think, say and do"  
<http://www.positivedeism.com>
- **Dynamic Deism: Belief in God Through Reason and Nature...**  
<http://dynamicdeism.org>

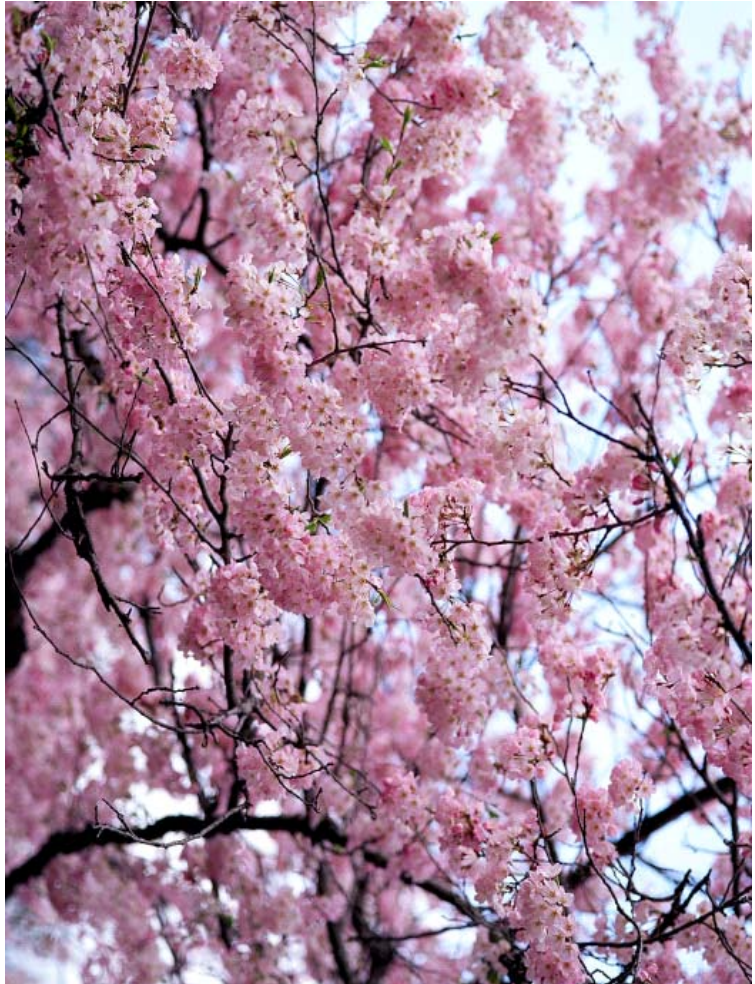
### *Editor's Note...*

"The views expressed by the authors of the articles in this newsletter don't necessarily reflect the views of all Deists, or of the Deist Alliance"

### *Personal Announcements...*

Everyone at the Deist Alliance would like to thank Jay Boswell and Steve Dowell for their contributions to the Deist community and more importantly for their friendship and support over the years.

Best Wishes Guys!



### *What is the Deist Alliance?*

The Deist Alliance (DA) consists of various Deist groups who have formed a friendly alliance with each other in order to open channels of communication, share information, resources and advice, and generally work together toward a higher goal of promoting Deism to the world...

For more information about Deism or the Deist Alliance check out the following website: <http://deistalliance.org>

## *Truth: Resuming the Age of Reason...*

January 29th was the 270th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine. Even though he was credited by some of his fellow statesmen with having saved the Revolution in its darkest hour, he certainly became the most unsung of our founders, and his memory has been much maligned. He was hounded on his deathbed to recant his religious beliefs, only six mourners attended his funeral, his tombstone was constantly vandalized and desecrated, and his remains were eventually lost. Why this shift from glory to gall?

In 1795, with the shadow of the guillotine hanging over his neck during the French Revolution, he wrote something he'd been putting off for years, part one of "The Age of Reason". It became the defining work on American Deism and religious freedom, and the cause of his derision by those who had fled European religious repression to come to America to practice their own brand of religious bigotry.

Thomas Paine was not only a philosopher, he was also a statesman, and Thomas Edison ironically appreciated Paine's inventiveness. All three of these characteristics as well as the reasoned pursuit of truth were shared by many of the founders, especially Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. So, looking around at all the wonderful advances in science and technology since that Age of Enlightenment, a thought that's likely to come to mind is that truth is advancing at an awe inspiring rate.

It's true that our knowledge of natural law and how to harness it are indeed growing exponentially; but there remain double standards of justice worldwide, a lack of any apparent progress in love and civility, and Keats' "beauty it truth" is believed by many residing in academic bastions adjacent to those where science is flourishing, to be the only truth--and used to rationalize the tailoring of moral relativism according to individual whim rather than arriving at it through reason.

What's the cause of this disconnect of science from the other aspects of truth? Science may be driven by passion but it isn't ruled by it as the others usually are.

Answering that question is part of the reason I

humbly presumed to build upon Paine's Age of Reason, and to publish my ideas under the same title as this column. In addition to addressing other questions such as why bad things happen to good people and vice versa, and what might be a reasoned, self-evident foundation for morality, I think there is a desperate need to understand the basics of what truth actually is and why it's important.

Many of us naturally assume that God is love. Would it not be more complete to say that God is truth?

Two-thousand years ago, Jesus is quoted as saying, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice."

Whatever else we might believe about who Jesus was, we can certainly agree with the value he placed on truth; all, that is, except perhaps for those for whom truth is the enemy, and echo Pilate's mocking response to Jesus down the millennia, venting their contempt to this day with the rhetorical question, "What is truth?"

It's almost impossible to believe that we have academic disciplines for every imaginable study except for truth itself. Epistemology, the study of the nature of knowledge, comes the closest, but knowledge is only a part of the picture that, as implied above, also includes justice, love and beauty. I've had to coin a word, veritology, for the study of the nature of truth and its pursuit, a subject that should have been the guiding light for us all since civilization began.

Perhaps James Russell Lowell was thinking the same thing when he wrote "The Present Crisis" in 1844, which contains this famous passage:

*Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim  
unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch  
above his own.*

~Mahlon Marr

## *The Compass and the Violin (Continued...)*

Into this debate came a man of superior intellect, a laughing soul, and a deep and abiding connection to the universe. His name was Albert Einstein. In the fields of science, his legacy is unsurpassed, but what I have found most profound about his life's work were his attempts to heal the division between science and religion, carried out in newspaper and magazine articles, lectures, private letters, and personal conversations throughout his life.

*"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind"* Albert said in lecture given in New York in 1941. Einstein believed that Science could determine facts about the universe, but could not offer any social guidance or values. He decried philosophies rooted solely in science, such as "social Darwinism" as immoral and unjust. At the same time, religion could speak to how we would like things to be in our world, but without science to point out how things were, you would never be able to find a path to that prophetic vision.

Albert believed, and believed deeply, that the rift between science and the inherent religious impulse within humankind was very harmful to the development of both science and religion. And harmful to the development of humankind. He often spoke of how the most effective scientists were moved by deep religious feeling in their explorations of the natural laws. When religion ignores science, it ignores one of the primary sources of religious experience, the vast and awe inspiring nature of the universe.

Einstein said...

*"What I see in nature is a grand design that we can comprehend and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility...."*

And though science can explore that grand design, Albert acknowledges its inherent limitations.

*"The content of scientific theory itself offers no moral foundation for the personal conduct of life."*

In each of these statements, Albert gives us the inherent reason why science and religion need one another. Without the wonder of exploring the universe, Religion can be caught in a trap of

stagnant traditions. Without an understanding of the religious impulse, Science can fall into the dangerous realm of using discoveries for negative, destructive, and unethical ends.

This was a deeply personal issue for Albert late in his life, as he reacted in horror to the atomic destruction of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He viewed that as a failure of both science and religion, as well as a personal failure. Near the end of his life he admitted to a close friend...

*"I made one mistake in my life... When I signed that letter to President Roosevelt advocating that the bomb should be built."*

He allowed his desire for scientific advancement to outrun his own religious moral sense. He would not do so again. His reaction to the use of the atomic bomb led him to my favorite Einstein quote.... "I am a militant pacifist... I will fight for peace!"

Yet, was the religion that Albert Einstein spoke of... the religious impulse that he felt was needed to compliment and moderate pursuit of science... was it to be found in the religions of his day? Or of our day?

Like many Scientists, Albert had a progressive view of knowledge... that knowledge built upon prior knowledge, learning upon prior learning, leading humankind to a greater and greater understanding of ourselves and of the universe we inhabit. He also viewed religion as a progression towards a clearer understanding of the questions that Science cannot answer... questions about purpose and values, ethics and morality.

For Albert, religion began as a reaction to the fear of the natural world that was inherent in humanity. In a world of cause and effect, where our early ancestors could see the effects of nature, but not understand the causes, humanity developed a theology that corresponded to many of these things they did not understand. These Gods could be appealed to for protection, could be enlisted against ones enemies, and could be used as a salve for the fears that were at the heart of existence in an incomprehensible universe.

Albert's argument claimed that over time, as humanity began to understand their world a bit more clearly, the need for a salve against fear of nature lessened and some peoples began to move towards religious traditions that were based more upon enforcing morality and less upon relieving fear of the natural world. As our ability to kill each other grew, and grew, and grew, Albert believed humanity became more fearful about what other humans might do, and less fearful about the dangers of nature.

Religious traditions that enforced moral codes based upon the "stick and carrot" of "eternal damnation" and "heavenly reward" came into being as a check upon our increasing destructive ability as a species. When I look at recent history, however, I cannot but see that what Albert called religions of morality have been of only limited effectiveness in preventing the evil we humans choose to visit upon each other.

These are the same traditions which so often come into public and passionate conflict with the institutions of science, for they sense that science, in its objectivity, is also essentially amoral. It has no inherent morality of its own.

The progressive scientist in Albert saw another step in the religious path of humanity... and that was a religion that was centered not only in the past, but in the present and in the future. A religion that, while not composed of science, both complimented it and was complimented by it. A religion that was inspired by the grandness, mysticism, and majesty of the universe itself... from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy... from the organization of ants to the boundless chaos of human religious, art, and philosophical creativity. A religion that embraced an ever changing concept of both knowledge and faith.

Albert said that *"The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. The religion which is based on experience, which refuses dogmatism."*

Albert foresaw a non-creedal religion, based upon our experiences in this world, and yet still able to learn and grow from the religious scriptures of our past. A religion in which he said, *"Life is sacred. That is to say, it is the supreme value, to which all other values are subordinate."*

## Sound Familiar?

In speaking of his own religious faith, Albert said in an interview that "I cannot conceive of a personal God who would directly influence the actions of individuals, or would directly sit in judgment on creatures of his own creation... My religiosity consists in a humble admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we, with our weak and transitory understanding, can comprehend of reality. Morality is of the highest importance—but for us, not for God."

But it is on the question of the relationship between the pursuit of knowledge through science, and the pursuit of understanding through religion, that Albert most speaks to us today.

*"All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling human life, lifting it from the sphere of mere physical existence and leading the individual towards freedom."*

Albert did not believe in a personal God... he did not believe in God as a being that intervened in the universe. And yet he believed that what was true about religion was that connection that we as humans can feel with the universe and with the divine. The awe and mystery, the wonder around us can inspire us to hold sacred the mystical nature of life. In his time, Albert believed that the religion that most closely fit his view of this third stage of human religious development was Buddhism.

And yet, our movement of religious liberalism has changed from what it was in Albert's time. In that span of years, though our own religious journey, we have retraced many of the paths that Albert took within the playgrounds of his own mind. We have come much closer to embodying that "subtle religious spirit", and that next stage in Albert's progressive view of the human religious impulse.

Today there is a challenge and responsibility. The task of healing the rift between science and religion, the mission of making religion the true partner of Scientific exploration, the goal of showing that they are not only compatible, but necessary for one another... That task falls to us. It should not be scientists who actively oppose the

placement of warning stickers on science texts, but rather those of us of liberal faith.

When I first presented this sermon, I had no basis in personal experience to understand this connection between science and religion that Albert was speaking of. Sure, it appealed to my intellectual religious nature, something I share with many of my fellow Deists, but I did not have any experience in a scientific community to see it in reality... My science experience was limited to a high school chemistry professor who gave me enough points on my final exam so that I would graduate because, and I quote, she did not ever want to see me again...

But this past summer, I served as a hospital chaplain at a teaching hospital in Tennessee. I also had the privilege to attend a series of lectures by Thomas Moore, a psychologist and author focusing on spirituality and the soul. Thomas put forth an idea that I saw over and over again in my experience as a hospital chaplain.

In our secular modernism, we like to pretend that medicine is primarily a science. Our Doctors and nurses are trained in very scientific methods; they are assisted by the cutting edge of modern technology. Helicopters and ambulances bring you to the center of health and healing, experimental trials are conducted, resident doctors and medical students are trained, and so much more.

And yet, the similarities between a modern hospital, and ancient temples of healing are fascinating... think about it. The modern temple of medicine is often set in a park-like setting, and is usually a quite imposing structure. It is built as a labyrinth, and you can only find your way around with the help of one of the initiated, or by learning enough of the holy language to read the signs yourself (Radiology, Cardiology, Gastroenterology, Ihavenoidea-ology).

You are surrounded by a hierarchy of priests and acolytes (doctors, nurses, and techs), all of whom show a certain deference to those higher in the priestly order, but in which you are the supplicant. The priests, initiated into the secret knowledge through years of training, all wear special identifying robes showing their status... we call them "White Lab Coats". Or the nursing scrubs of the Acolytes.

The entire system is religious in nature, and is designed to instill in all who enter, initiated and uninitiated alike, a religious respect for the sacred knowledge and mystery that is contained within the temple. It is designed to reinforce the authority and mystery of the priest-shaman, the doctor, when you finally reach that small room, buried deep in the heart of the labyrinth, and are granted the private session with the priest of health.

That we have, even in our desire to portray medicine as one of our most modern and secular institutions, integrated so many religious elements without ever really intending to says to me that we humans inherently understand that science and religion can not, should not, and will not be separated... Efforts to do so will fail, and will lead to a lessening of both science and religion. There is nothing more religious in nature than health... than decisions of life and death.

I believe the trends that we see in medicine, of integrating religious symbology and feeling, exists through out all science. As a faith tradition, our goal should be to help science and religion realize that they have never been separate, and they weaken each other when they try.

Rev. Michael Dowd refers to scientists as "*empirical theologians*". That the study of the Universe is itself a religious act. We humans are always looking for an answer to the question of "Why do we exist?" That question could be considered the basis of all human religion. Perhaps humans exist to try and understand and appreciate all of the rest of the creation from which we have come. As Michael Dowd puts it, "*We humans are the universe becoming self-aware*".

The two practices of that universal self-awareness are religion and science.

Albert is gone, and so the task of healing the division between science and religion falls into our hands. We must be the religion of both the compass, and the violin.

~David Pyle...

## Famous "Freethinker" Quotes...

This section will feature quotes from famous deists and other "freethinkers". In this edition we will focus on quotes from John Locke...

*"I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts."*

*"I attribute the little I know to my not having been ashamed to ask for information, and to my rule of conversing with all descriptions of men on those topics that form their own peculiar professions and pursuits."*

*"If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do much what as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly."*

*"It is easier for a tutor to command than to teach."*

*"It is of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean."*

*"As people are walking all the time, in the same spot, a path appears."*

*"New opinions are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common."*

*"Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours."*

*"Reverie is when ideas float in our mind without reflection or regard of the understanding."*

*"The improvement of understanding is for two ends: first, our own increase of knowledge; secondly, to enable us to deliver that knowledge to others."*

*"To love our neighbor as ourselves is such a truth for regulating human society, that by that alone one might determine all the cases in social morality."*

*"What worries you, masters you."*

