

Jefferson the Deist?

Post by “EricR” of January 17, 2018 at 3:38 PM

I've come across the claim that Thomas Jefferson was a Deist several times over the years and never really gave it much thought until discovering his Epicurean roots. Given Epicurus' notion of the gods being perfectly blissful beings without any wants or worries and therefore uninvolved in human affairs, I wonder if this idea, when applied to the concept of a single god, could've contributed to his Deism. (assuming he really was such).

Post by “Cassius” of January 17, 2018 at 4:20 PM

I think that is a great question and I agree with the concern. Given that Jefferson clearly understood Epicurus and Epicurus' contentions about the universe being eternal, I would not think that Jefferson thought of himself as a deist, and I bet a lot of the commentary just comes from the lack of familiarity people have with the Epicurean position - they don't know of any alternative to (1) Theist , (2) Deist, or (3) Atheist. I think we'd have to dig into Jefferson's own letters to determine what he thought, so maybe over time as people come across this thread they can suggest cites. But I do recall reading that Jefferson was very concerned about his words being used against him, so it may always be difficult to be sure of what he really thought, as opposed to what he wrote. Hopefully others can clarify this over time.

Post by “EricR” of January 17, 2018 at 4:28 PM

Thanks and I look forward to others' comments. My speculation comes from my understanding of the word "Deist" as describing a god that is not involved in the world, a detached god. This seems to correspond with Epicurus' notions of the gods so I don't find it to be a big stretch to think Jefferson may have been thinking along these lines. Also, Deism was a common thread of thought in his time. Maybe some of the more scholarly members here can shed light on this. Certainly this is not a major question, but I'm curious.

Post by “Cassius” of January 17, 2018 at 4:51 PM

I should have addressed that point in my first post. Yes I agree that my understanding of "Deist" is a detached god, but I also understand the term to mean "supernatural" and also "created the universe." I associate the term Deist with the "clockmaker" model of the god who sets things in motion and steps back, and THAT would not be compatible with Epicurus. The part you describe is definitely compatible, but if "deist" also includes "supernatural" and "universe creator" then that part would not. Those are the issues I would like to see clarified in examining what Jefferson believed.

Post by “EricR” of January 17, 2018 at 5:32 PM

Yes, that makes sense thanks. I am thinking of the word in the very limited way of a detached god and speculating that Epicurus' influence on Jefferson, combined with the term being prominent in his time might be connected. From what I've read, he kept his deepest beliefs to himself.

Post by “Cassius” of January 17, 2018 at 6:00 PM

Yes, I suspect that he probably either agreed with Epicurus exactly, but no matter what he really thought he knew that he better keep at least some of those views to himself in the interest of his politics. I seem to remember reading that Thomas Paine and some of the more radical deists resented this about Jefferson.

And that actually is another interesting topic. For a while I was reading a lot of Thomas Paine. Paine truly seems to have been a Deist, and as radical as he was I have never read that Paine talked about Epicurus directly.

Post by “Hiram” of January 18, 2018 at 11:27 AM

There is a "petty bungler" quote which insinuates that he believed God had created the universe, but then retreated?

And he had a hand in writing the Declaration of Independence, which I don't remember if it mentions "nature's God", but I know the Constitution does.