The deistic movement in eighteenth-century America is a fascinating but sadly neglected chapter in the history of American thought. In this anthology, I have collected and commented on the most pertinent deistic texts, many of them long out of print, and prefaced the whole with an introductory essay that examines the historical and intellectual background to the curious career of American rational religion as well as its influence on subsequent theological and philosophical thought. Selections have been gleaned from the major books and periodicals of the deistic movement, and this necessarily means that important but less central sources—such as selections from the writings of Joel Barlow or articles from the Newburgh Mirror—have been omitted. In dealing with a tradition that has as rich and extensive a literature as American deism, certain sacrifices must be made, however reluctantly.

I make no pretense of providing in this volume a social or political history of the American Enlightenment. Instead, I focus squarely on an examination and interpretation of deism in order to unravel its philosophical, theological, and ethical tenets. Those readers who wish to supplement this intellectual history with broader and more concrete treatments may consult the titles listed in the bibliographical essay, including my own Rational Infidels: The American Deists (1992).

Two editorial comments are in order here, one structural and the other stylistic. First, chapters 3 through 10 are introduced by short essays in which I provide summaries and pertinent historical information. The first two chapters, containing selections from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson respectively, employ a slightly more complicated format. In addition to the usual preliminary essays, I also preface each of the selections in the Franklin chapter, and many in the Jefferson one, with individual introductions that focus on their specific historical backgrounds and underscore their thematic continuity. Most of the Franklin and Jefferson selections are taken from private correspondence and journal memoranda rather than from systematic treatises or books. As a consequence, it seemed important that the reader have some idea of the two men’s correspondents as well as the context of their remarks. Given the number of readings in each of the first two chapters, the least confusing (although perhaps slightly cumbersome) strategy seemed to begin each selection with short explanatory prefaces.

Second, in preparing material for each of the ten chapters, I have corrected obvious misprints and idiosyncratic spellings that found their way into the
eighteenth-century sources from which I worked. At times I have also altered punctuation to facilitate comprehension of more convoluted passages. In most instances, however, I have retained typical eighteenth-century stylisms, spelling, and grammar.

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Finally, Kim Daubman has been my mainstay in this and past projects. The American Deists is also dedicated to her as an inadequate but heartfelt tribute.