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THE AGE OF REASON



Sculpture of Thomas Paine
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If *Rights of Man* shocked and scandalized the ruling classes, *The Age of Reason* (1794–1795) was to prove an even more controversial work. Although Paine's avowed purpose was to counter the rise of atheism in France, with his declaration that he believed "in one God and no more" (*Complete Writings*, p. 464*), he nonetheless proceeded to disavow organized religion, including "the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of" because "all national institutions of churches appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit" (p. 464). Simply put, "My own mind is my own church" (p. 464). For Paine, "infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving" but rather in "professing to believe what he does not believe" (p. 464). In this work, he would question the premises of the Bible, rejecting the conjoined ideas of mystery, miracles, and revelation; "truth never envelops itself in mystery," he insisted:

But the resurrection of a dead person from the grave, and his ascension through the air, is a thing very different as to the evidence it admits of, to the invisible conception of a child in the womb. A thing which everybody is required to believe, requires that the proof and evidence of it should be equal to all, and universal. Instead of this, a small number of persons, not more than eight or nine, are introduced as proxies for the whole world, to say they saw it, and all the rest of the world are called upon to believe it. But it appears that Thomas did not believe the resurrection, and, as they say, would not believe without having ocular and manual demonstration himself. So neither will I, and the reason is equally as good for me, and for every other person, as for Thomas. (p. 468)

How can anyone trust mere hearsay—regardless of how long it has been around? Yet, that is exactly what these claims amount to, according to Paine. So even as he described Jesus, "the reformist and revolutionary," as "a virtuous and an amiable man" (p. 469)—viewing his morality as "the most benevolent" without being "exceeded by any" (p. 467)—readers took offense at his

* Page numbers refer to *Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, edited by Philip Foner, New York: Citadel Press, 1945, reprint in 1969.

claim that "not a line of what is called the New Testament is of his own writing". (p. 468)

No less shocking was Paine's disavowal of redemption—an idea that he found repulsive from an early age, in the belief that "it was making God Almighty act like a passionate man, that killed his son when he could not revenge himself in any other way" (p. 497). After all, when someone commits a crime, "moral Justice still cannot take the innocent for the guilty, even if the innocent would offer itself" (p. 481). For Paine, such flawed logic indicated that "the doctrine of redemption is founded on a mere pecuniary idea corresponding to that of a debt which another person might pay" (p. 481). Instead, the true word of God is "THE CREATION WE BEHOLD" (p. 482): in nature, in the various planets, and other universes.

More troubling to Paine's critics, however, was his painstaking deconstruction of the Bible in part 2, not to mention his irreverent tone, as he delved into contradictions and confused details: was there, in fact, "sufficient authority for believing the Bible to be the Word of God?" (p. 518). Evidently not. Venturing further than d'Holbach, who viewed the Bible as a "hotchpotch," Paine would maintain that "every book in the Bible, from Genesis to Judges, is without authenticity" (p. 535). If the books of Moses indicated anyone but him to be the author, and to be written several hundred years later no less, the same could be said of the Book of Joshua; for "in the name of common sense, can it be Joshua that relates what people had done after he was dead?" (p. 532) Paine would proceed to deplore the book of Isaiah as "one of the most wild and disorderly compositions ever put together," forming only "one continued incoherent, bombastical rant, full of extravagant metaphor, without application, and destitute of meaning" (p. 552). Nor did he regard the book of Jeremiah as anything more than a "medley of detached, unauthentic anecdotes put together by some stupid bookmaker" (p. 559). Similarly, the book of Judges "has not so much as a nominal voucher" but "is altogether fatherless" (p. 534). As for the book of Job, it was one of the better sections, but most likely not of Hebrew origin (given its scientific bent) and probably did not belong to the Bible either, while the Psalms of David were obviously penned by various writers.

Like Voltaire and d'Holbach, Paine would also express horror and disgust at biblical depictions of violence. In part 1, he had already complained that "whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the word of God" (p. 474). In addition, "there are matters in that book, said to be done by the express command of God, that are as shocking as anything done by Robespierre, by Carrier, by the English government in the East Indies" (p. 518). No less abhorrent was Moses, one of most "detestable villains than in any period of the world have disgraced the name of man" (p. 528).

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Equally offensive were the accounts of sexual license—most notably, the circumstances involved in the birth of Jesus. “Blasphemously obscene,” the story “gives an account of a young woman engaged to be married” only to be “debauched by a ghost. Notwithstanding which, Joseph afterward marries her, cohabits with her as his wife, and in his turn rivals the ghost” (p. 571). In short, it is a tale where “there is not a priest but must be ashamed to own it” (p. 571).

To sum up, only one dire conclusion could be drawn of Christianity: that of all religions, there were “none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity” (p. 600). It was an “engine of power” that produced “atheists and fanatics” (p. 600). Flatly denying any value to theology, Paine slammed it repeatedly as “nothing”:

The study of theology as it stands in Christian churches, is the study of nothing; it is founded on nothing; it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authorities; it has no data; it can demonstrate nothing; and admits of no conclusion. Not any thing can be studied as a science without our being in possession of the principles upon which it is founded; and as this is not the case with Christian theology, it is therefore the study of nothing. (p. 601)

What was the alternative to the study of this “nothing”? Certainly not the dead languages as taught by traditional universities where the “philosopher is lost in the linguist” (p. 492), but the sciences. As Murray, Priestley, and others before him had extolled the sciences, an emboldened Paine would defend it as the true “Bible of creation,” because one could “know God only through his works” and by “the order and manner in which it acts” (pp. 601–02). It is science that fully reveals the sublimity of God’s creation:

But it is not to us, the inhabitants of this globe, only, that the benefits arising from a plurality of worlds are limited. The inhabitants of each of the worlds of which our system is composed enjoy the same opportunities of knowledge as we do. Neither does the knowledge stop here. The system of worlds next to us exhibits, in its revolutions, the same principles and school of science to the inhabitants of

their system, as our system does to us, and in like manner throughout the immensity of space.

Our ideas, not only of the almightiness of the Creator, but of his wisdom and his beneficence, become enlarged in proportion as we contemplate the extent and the structure of the universe. We see our own earth filled with abundance, but we forget to consider how much of that abundance is owing to the scientific knowledge the vast machinery of the universe has unfolded. (p. 503)

Here, God is no longer a lowly trickster, performing “miracles” for entertainment, but the “great mechanic of the creation, the first philosopher and original teacher of all science” (p. 603).

Not unlike *Rights of Man*, *The Age of Reason* was prosecuted by the government for blasphemy. But unlike *Rights of Man*, few chose to defend it, as part 2 proved to be too much for many to stomach, including Joseph Priestley and fellow defender of the French revolution, Gilbert Wakefield. A few people, however, defended, if not embraced, this highly controversial text. William Blake was to argue that Paine was a better Christian than Richard Watson, the bishop of Llandaff and author of a 1796 rebuttal to *The Age of Reason*. In 1818, the radical journalist Richard Carlile would unequivocally agree to be sentenced for six years in prison for printing it, rejecting any legal conditions on a one-year term—after defiantly reading aloud *The Age of Reason* from beginning to end at his trial. ~~~



For the full 22-page article, contact the author at, drfranceschiu@gmail.com.

Frances Chiu, a TPF Board member, has taught history and literature at The New School since 2002. Her online course on Paine and the Enlightenment is probably the first course in the US to focus on Paine. Her other courses concern 19th century horror literature as well as 17th – 18th century social and democratic movements. In 2009, she organized a colloquium, “A New Era for Politics: Thomas Paine and the Rise of Modern Liberalism.” In 2011, she was nominated for a Distinguished University Teaching Award. She is now completing a textbook on *Rights of Man* for Routledge Books.