

more convinced that to preserve republican principles it was necessary to destroy the priesthood. He was also worried by the fact that in their hatred of the counter-revolutionary role played by the clergy the people of France "were running headlong into Atheism . . ." At one stroke he might save the true religion, Deism, from atheism and republicanism from despotism. With this in mind he wrote his famous theological treatise.

Thomas Paine was no Atheist, Theodore Roosevelt to the contrary. Together with the foremost liberals and intellectuals in America and Europe, he believed in Deism.²¹ And like many of these thinkers, Franklin, Jefferson, Wollaston, etc., he was influenced by the intellectual revolution achieved by Newton and Locke in their discovery of a systematic and harmonious universe whose laws could be ascertained by human reason. After seeing the application of the light of rationalism in the political revolutions in America and in France, it seemed to him that the next step was to apply this same rationalism in religion. In his *Letter to Erskine*, Paine wrote: "Of all the tyrannies that effect mankind, tyranny in religion is the worst; every other species of tyranny is limited to the world we live in; but this attempts to stride beyond the grave, and seeks to pursue us into eternity."

Paine's views about the Bible and religion were in no sense original for every one of them had been expressed by Deists before him. But these men had written heavy treatises for scholars. Paine wrote in his usual simple and clear language for the common man. He took Deism out of the sphere of academic discussions and made it a living creed for the average man. By doing so, of course, he threatened the hold of the clergy upon the people. As long as Deism was confined to intellectuals in the upper middle class and liberal sections of the nobility there was no danger to the vested interests of the priesthood. But once it became, as it did after the publication of *The Age of Reason*, a subject for discussion among the common people, the outlook was entirely different. Men, who had said many times before the same things Paine set down in his work, had been ignored. Paine was forced to endure a barrage of calumny and vituperation such as has been visited upon few men in our history.

In one other respect Paine was different from others who had written

²¹ The evolution of Paine's religious opinions toward deism has been recently discussed by Robert P. Falk in the article "Thomas Paine: Deist or Quaker," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. LXII, January, 1938, pp. 52-63.